

Putin's Russia and European Security

The Ukraine Crisis marks an important watershed in Europe's security order: Russia is challenging fundamental principles of international cooperation. Nevertheless, the frequently touted image of a "new Cold War" is too simplistic. Still, the current conflict between the West and Moscow has consequences for European and Swiss security policy.

By Christian Nünlist
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After Russia's annexation of Crimea, it was not long before voices in the West began referring to a "new Cold War". Indeed, the Ukraine Crisis marks a watershed in the development of European security policy: President Vladimir Putin has decided against pursuing a shared political perspective with the West. Principles such as respecting the territorial integrity and political independence of states, which Russia had previously affirmed, were flagrantly violated by Moscow in March 2014. Instead, Russia used military force to assert its interests in Ukraine. The illegal annexation of Crimea has resulted in Russia's borders now no longer being generally recognized. In a very special way, this illustrates how, contrary to the agreements codified in the Final Act of the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) of 1975, frontiers in the Euro-Atlantic space are now subject to change by means other than mutual agreement. Thus, the rift between Russia and the West has deepened in 2014, and is unlikely to diminish any time soon in the absence of a domestically induced radical turnaround of Russian policy.

The Ukraine Crisis marks the end of the post-Cold War period marked by widespread hope that the peaceful revolutions in Eastern and Central Europe would give rise to a democratic sphere of peace from



Pro-Russian separatists in the Eastern part of Ukraine returned European Security to the agenda of global security. *Baz Ratner / Reuters*

Vancouver to Vladivostok. In 2014, Putin destroyed the prospects of establishing a community of shared values between the West and Russia – and thus also the vision of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) as a "security community" of likeminded states within the Euro-Atlantic space.

Putin appears to have made a conscious decision to renounce cooperation with the

West permanently. The West, for its part, must prepare for a long-term political confrontation with Russia, a nuclear power with a veto on the UN Security Council. Nevertheless, there will be no return to the Cold War. The structural differences between then and now are simply too profound. *Firstly*, Russia is no longer a global superpower comparable to the Soviet Union between 1945 and 1990. The world is no longer shaped by a bipolar order, and

ideological struggles between capitalism and communism have largely died down. *Secondly*, Europe is no longer the epicenter of a global struggle. The US does not intend a “pivot back to Europe”. Therefore, Europe itself must carry the main burden of the new conflict.

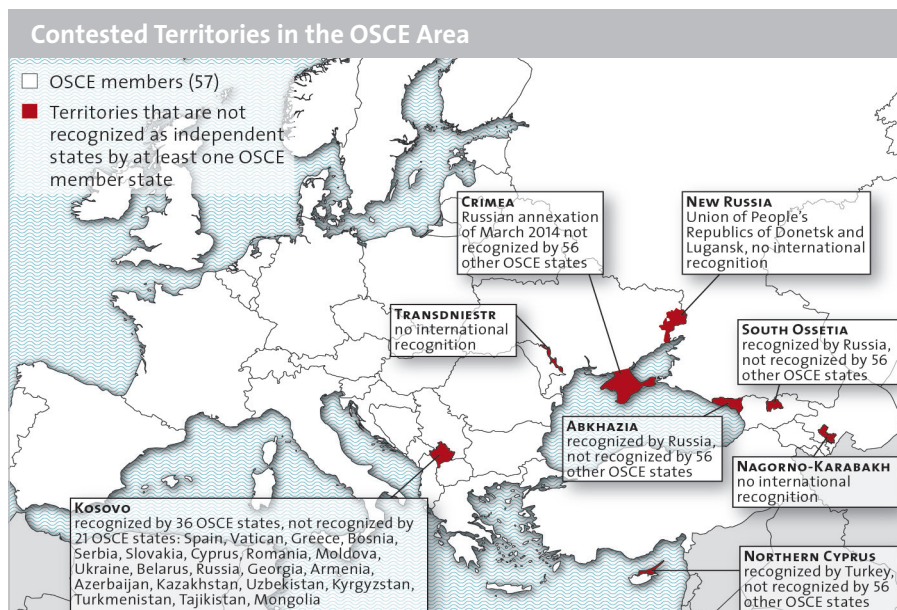
Relations with Moscow will dominate the shape of European Security in the coming years. Switzerland, too, is immediately affected. In its foreign-policy strategy for 2016–2019 and in its security policy report for 2016, Berne will have to give some serious thought to Russia’s role in Europe and Switzerland’s contribution to European Security.

A Contest for Influence and Territory

At the core of the current political dispute between Russia and the West are two competing claims: On the one hand, the West asserts that its values are universally valid and that any state that meets certain criteria may be accepted as a member of Western structures such as NATO or the EU. On the other hand, Putin’s Russia has the ambition to be a center of power that is diametrically opposed to the West in terms of its values. These efforts are centered on the foundation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) together with Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan, with the goal of bringing other neighboring states into its orbit as permanent members.

Ukraine is the fulcrum of this geostrategic contest. If the country should ever become a Western-oriented, functioning democracy, Moscow’s dreams of creating an anti-Western sphere of influence would be over. Conversely, the West would be betraying its own values if it shut down the path to EU and NATO membership for countries seeking to avoid a return to Russia’s tutelage. The right to choose alliance membership freely was an important element of the CSCE process that gave shape also to Europe’s security architecture after 1990.

Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia form one group of states where majority populations are increasing looking Westward, but find the path blocked – due to their self-induced economic and political deficiencies, but also because Russia significantly contributed to ensuring that these countries remain embroiled in territorial conflicts for the foreseeable future. Therefore, relations between the West and Russia in this region will inevitably remain antagonistic.



To a certain degree, the situation today is more difficult than the one that prevailed during the second half of the Cold War. The Helsinki Final Act of 1975 was based on the principle that all existing borders would be respected, and that they would only be peacefully changed by mutual agreement. This basic consensus is a distant prospect in Europe today. In the course of the wars following the breakup of former Yugoslavia, new states were founded – not always with the consent of all OSCE members. Today, many countries including Russia, Georgia, Ukraine, Spain, and Greece refuse to extend recognition to Kosovo. Moscow, in turn, created Abkhazia and Ossetia in 2008 – entities whose state-

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hood is essentially only recognized by the Russian government; the “Republic of Transdnistr”, a secessionist region of Moldova, is not a recognized state either. Finally, after having annexed Crimea in violation of international law, Russia itself has external borders that are not recognized internationally. This makes it much more difficult today than in 1975 to print politically accurate maps.

A Rift Through Ukraine

Francis Fukuyama’s assertion in the summer of 1989 that “The End of History” had

arrived was only half true. The capitalist mode of production has suppressed all other models on the global scale, but Russia and China have contributed to the success of an authoritarian model of capitalism that is largely unfettered by democratic constraints. While the West champions democracy and the rule of law (including the protection of individual and minority rights) as well as pluralism and individualism, the “Eurasian School” that continues to gain importance in Russia contrasts national Russian values against those of the West and pursues a religiously flavored campaign against liberalism and “Western decadence”.

In retrospect, the Ukraine Crisis also confirms Samuel Huntington’s controversial remarks on the “Clash of Civilizations” in 1993, where he distinguished Western Christianity from Eastern Orthodoxy and anticipated that Belarus and Ukraine would be rent by cultural fault lines. Such a fault line can indeed be seen in Ukraine today. While the west of the country is resisting the claims of Putin’s increasingly anti-Western and Orthodox Russia, the east of the country feel kinship with it.

It is true that his model cannot explain every last facet of the Ukraine conflict, yet Huntington’s musings on a “Clash of Civilizations” have identified a key element. The consequences for the future order of Europe are significant: There is now good reason to believe that in the coming years, that order will be marked by the antago-

nism between an enlightened, secular West that enshrines the rights of the individual and an Orthodox, anti-Western East that emphasizes the collective.

Arms Control and Détente

Disarmament and arms control talks were an important part of the policy of détente during the Cold War. It was not until the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty of 1987 that they achieved broad results, but the talks themselves from the 1950s onward promoted better appreciation of what the two sides, respectively, were thinking, and initial progress in military confidence-building was already achieved at Helsinki in 1975.

However, in the past decade, nearly the entire arms control agenda has come to a standstill. The US and Russia accuse each other of having violated the INF Treaty. This dispute might result in a termination of this far-reaching nuclear disarmament agreement. The ongoing conflict over NATO’s missile defense system, which Russia regards as a threat to its strategic nuclear second-strike capability, currently consti-

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tutes an insurmountable obstacle. Moscow is generally not interested in negotiating over its nuclear weapons, which it regards as an important component of its great-power status.

In the sphere of conventional weapons, too, there has been a negotiation standstill for years. For the past 15 years, the dispute over extending recognition to territorial entities and the linkage between European arms control and the resolution of sub-regional conflicts, which was imposed by the NATO states, have been blocking the implementation of new agreements and prevented the adaptation of existing ones to new developments in security policy. In March 2015, Moscow abrogated the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) altogether after having suspended it in 2007.

At the same time, areas of shared interest persist. For example, in the nuclear negotiations with Iran, the Western partners and Russia are acting in concert, as all sides are

interested in preventing Tehran from embarking on the development of nuclear weapons. Preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons was a shared interest of East and West alike even during the Cold War, paving the way for the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1963 and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1968. Today, there is another shared interest – the fight against the “Islamic State” in the Middle East.

Conversely, the eruption of proxy wars in developing countries as seen during the heyday of the West-East conflict is difficult to imagine at this point; not only because Russia lacks the military potential, but also because of the prevalence of “intervention fatigue” in US public opinion today.

No More Fulda Gap

The main difference between the Cold War of yesteryear and the current, new conflict is the strategic picture in military terms. Though Moscow has modernized its armed forces in recent years and has upgraded certain units to increase their mobility and operational deployability, the Fulda Gap is no longer a concern, nor are there tank armies ready to push through to the Rhine within days of an outbreak of hostilities. The Ukraine Crisis has shown, however, that Moscow is able to employ other military capabilities effectively. By using special forces to infiltrate foreign territory as well as through disinformation campaigns, Russia has not only succeeded in prizing Crimea loose from the rest of Ukraine, but also managed to create permanent unrest in eastern Ukraine. Another danger lies in the discernible Russian tendency to assign tactical nuclear weapons a doctrinal role due to the inferiority of its conventional forces.

In the future, NATO might be confronted with military challenges that extend to the alliance’s territory, but are difficult to manage. During the Cold War, a “tripwire force” of allied troops in West Berlin was sufficient to deter an attack on the city by the numerically far superior Soviet divisions surrounding them, as such a move could have triggered a nuclear war. Conversely, it is precisely because there is no such automatic threat of escalation, for instance, in a potential crisis in and over the Baltic states with their significant Russian minorities that limited military skirmishes with Russian forces are not entirely out of the question.



Among Eastern European NATO and EU states, the massive loss of trust in the Russian political class has generated a strong desire for reassurance against Russian encroachment. At its Wales summit in September 2014, NATO members agreed on measures that remain just below the threshold of an open disavowal of principles previously agreed with Russia: For now, there will be no permanent deployment of NATO troops on a significant scale in the new member states. In a politically astute move, NATO decided not to sever all links with Russia in 2014, but only to suspend all political and military activities. Existing structures such as the NATO-Russia Council can thus be used again as soon as rapprochement between NATO and Russia is desired.

For those European states that are particularly concerned about their national security due to Moscow’s actions, NATO thus remains the core element of their security provisions. On the other hand, the EU’s importance in security policy matters is declining, not least due to the patent weaknesses of the European armies. While Washington is relentless in demanding more defense contributions from its European allies, all that ultimately matters for the eastern NATO members is that the US with its military presence should remain part of the European Security architecture, thus guaranteeing protection from Moscow. That is why these NATO states are interested in hosting US missile defense installations on their territory, and

enthusiastic about a continued presence of US nuclear arms in Europe. In view of the new challenges, NATO must urgently find consensus on a shared threat picture and a new deterrence doctrine.

Apart from niche activities, the EU, on the other hand, will by comparison remain almost completely insignificant in security policy terms. Within the EU, differences

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over strategic orientation are becoming more and more apparent. While Finland and Sweden are openly discussing the possibility of future NATO membership against the backdrop of renewed Russian threats – Finnish airspace is frequently violated by Russian fighter aircraft, while non-identified submarines operate off the Swedish coast – the new Greek government boasts of its traditional good relations with Moscow. While the two neutral EU members Ireland and Austria advocate nuclear disarmament, France as a nuclear power will have none of it, not least in view of the changed situation in Europe. An important stress test for the EU's unity over the Ukraine Crisis will be the matter of extending sanctions against Russia in July 2015.

The coming years of confrontation with Russia will be starkly different from the days of the Cold War. In particular, the conflict will not be a global one that has Europe as its epicenter. The consequence is that the US regards Russia as a regional challenge that is subordinate to other areas demanding attention – particularly in Asia. Europe will therefore have to bear the

brunt of the new confrontation. The main emphasis will be on political aspects such as conflict management with Russia in the framework of the OSCE.

Switzerland's Position

Russia's revisionist challenge to the post-1990 European Security architecture, delivered by military force, has not only made Europe less stable overnight, but has also placed a question mark over Switzerland's stance on security matters. While Switzerland, as a non-member of NATO, is far removed from any military danger that might emanate from Russia, and Putin's Russia is thus not an immediate military threat to Switzerland, the challenge for Switzerland will be to adjust its relationship to NATO as well as to Russia.

Switzerland has maintained a strategic partnership with Russia since 2005. In the context of the Swiss OSCE Chairmanship-in-Office in 2014, Switzerland was engaged in top-level crisis management and attempted to contribute to de-escalation. At the same time, the geopolitical struggle between the West and Russia over Ukraine, the Balkans, and the Caucasus is also an extremely worrying development from Switzerland's perspective. As a small neutral country, it cannot engage in power politics, but must rely on respect for international principles and rules. On this point, Switzerland is clearly engaged on behalf of Western values and has therefore strongly condemned Russia's actions in Ukraine. In the framework of the OSCE, Switzerland will have an important role in the coming years as a state that is neither a NATO nor an EU member. Therefore, also during the German and Austrian OSCE presidencies in 2016–17, Switzerland will likely con-

tinue to play a constructive role as a mediator between the West and Russia. Nevertheless, the territorial conflicts create practical difficulties for confidence-building measures such as maneuver observation in these entities.

In the matter of sanctions, Switzerland has not joined the Western measures against Russia, but has chosen a middle ground that permits it to undertake a potential mediating role between the West and Russia without being branded a sanctions violator. Ultimately, however, as a small European state, Switzerland is no more willing than the Western NATO or EU members to tolerate any challenge to the principle of territorial integrity.

Questions regarding Russia's role in Europe (40 years after Helsinki and 25 years after the Paris Charter), Switzerland's role as a NATO partner (20 years after joining NATO's Partnership for Peace in 1996), and Switzerland's role in Europe are in urgent need of sober analysis and strategically sound answers. The forthcoming key reports on Switzerland's foreign-policy stance for the legislative cycle 2016–2019 as well as the Security Policy Report 2016 are opportunities for engaging in that debate and outlining paths towards politically viable solutions.

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